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AMERICAN POETRY SINCE 1920

By Allen Tate

SHORTLY after 1920 a popular agitation for poetry, the most successful and sensational in our history, came to a close. Between 1912 and 1918 several distinct movements had got under way, and isolated poets, like Robinson and Frost, who might otherwise have come less swiftly to fame, were taken up on the rising sea of that time and were soon riding the full crest of the wave. There were doubtless certain defects in the intellectual climate of that decade, and yet it appeared to have a singular virtue—that of providing an atmosphere through which poetry could be readily communicated to the public. This atmosphere had quickly spread over the Northern section of the political unit (the South at that time had not yet risen to speech), and it seemed as if poetry had at last reached the public as intimately as the nineteenth century Bostonians had made their own poetry reach themselves. Then, suddenly, the genie withdrew into his bottle. He left the air as pellucidly thin as he had found it. And the poets, breathing heavily, burrowed once more into their holes.

The defect of the time was the fact that the air the poets breathed was not their own, but the breath of the genii (for there were two): Miss Amy Lowell and Mr. Louis Untermeyer. Miss Lowell's talent for being a popular figure had convinced the public, for a time, that it was interested in poetry; and yet, even before her death, she had lost much of her hold upon the popular imagination. This may or may not have been due to the ingratitude of the public, which refused its attention to her ideas after it had ceased to be amused. At any rate, by 1920 Imagism had played out, and polyphonic prose, no longer controversial, was no longer read.

Mr. Untermeyer's position was different. He pinned his faith to no single movement, but with amazing success applied an elastic

spirit to the comprehension of them all. He was able to phrase the right public interpretation of a great many poets: Sara Teasdale, E. A. Robinson, Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg . . . but the list is inexhaustible. Yet, in the last six or seven years, his influence has perceptibly declined. Mr. Untermeyer, taking always great risks, has made mistakes; but the very decline of his influence attests to the integrity of a useful career. He is temperamentally a partisan critic; his heart has always been with the poets of his own generation; and his service consists in his having stamped their reputations upon the mind of the reading public. Only critics of the first order can bridge two generations and outlast the enthusiasms of their own time. Mr. Untermeyer leaves no successor, and the popular defense of poetry has lost its effectiveness. The public has been left to infer that poetry itself has declined. Already there were giants in those days.

But, as a matter of fact, American poetry is now in certain respects more interesting than it has ever been. Its range of feeling is wider, its technical resources are deeper—its intention, in fact, is better informed than that of any other poetry in our literature. The contrast of its motives with those of the preceding generation will make them clear.

The poets who made the second decade of this century famous as the American Renaissance exhibited, in spite of their local differences, a singleness of outlook that seemed to prove that we had, after all, a national spirit and that our period of servitude to foreign models had ended. But, just as the atmosphere of communication between poet and public was misleading, there was something misleading in the unified Americanism of their attitude: it was not all that it seemed to be. With the exceptions of Robinson and Frost, the leading figures came from the Middle West. The spirit of that region was

boomed much as its land had been two generations before. Lindsay and Sandburg and Masters tracked down the local character of their section, and, once found, it easily fitted, under the pressure of frontier optimism, into the framework of national types and heroes who seemed to speak for the whole country. But the intention of these poets towards their material turned out to be only mildly representative, their production a kind of hurried programme music. What emerged was America boomed in terms of the West.

How successfully this movement made itself out to be the spirit of a united America is measured by the mistake of an English critic writing about John Crowe Ransom: Mr. Robert Graves assumed that, as an American poet, Mr. Ransom (who came after Sandburg and has a different background) was attempting to "express" the poor whites of the South. Mr. Graves had been instructed by *The Spoon River Anthology*; but the significance of his error will be clearer in a moment.

The misleading quality of the Middle-Western poetry boom came directly out of the conception of poetry that lay back of it. This was simple, untutored, and crude. And its production had the features of a hasty revolt. Moody, Woodberry, and Miss Peabody were decadents; they were severely inoculated against the living American scene. But the revolt from them was really carried out on their own plane of vision: their diction was broken up and a fresher idiom substituted; the physical scene was noted in more vivid detail. But the intensity of vision was not increased, and after the spell of the American catchwords had subsided, chaos yawned vastly as before. Beneath the aggressive Americanism of Sandburg, Lindsay, Masters, there was not a profound ordering of experience, personal or common; it is not surprising that they failed to give us a mature style. What they gave us was, in the end, *News from the West*. And Miss Lowell and Mr. Untermeyer were not unwilling to publish it.

The important thing, then, to remember, so far as the new poets are concerned, is the failure of their predecessors to leave them

firm ground to stand upon. The sociological excitement of the preceding generation was not disciplined; it yielded no permanent values. The excitement has abated; the new poets have not been able to share it, for it was not strong enough to make a tradition; and they have had to begin over again. Their performance is thus more varied, and it lacks the sustaining force of a common idea. It lacks utterly the belief in a united America. The poets of our own time have not been able to organize a school that could advertise itself as representative of the whole country.

There have, of course, been groups, like the *Fugitives* of Tennessee who did not advertise themselves at all. These poets started with open minds—that is, with the simple aim of writing poetry. But after five or six years it became clear that quite unconsciously they were fostering a sectional spirit, that they were indifferent to the Middle Western procedure of rendering an American as distinguished from any other scene, and that finally they were all private persons trying to solve the esthetic problem each in his own way. They were willing to draw upon all the resources of poetry that they knew, for it was obvious that their sectionalism, if it existed, and their nationalism, if that existed, would take care of themselves. There was no attempt to force the materials at hand into an easy significance (the mistake of the South Carolina poets). Fugitive poetry turned out to be profoundly sectional in that it was supported by the prejudices, feelings, values, into which the poets were born. Because the approach of the *Fugitives* to their art was the normal one, and because the normal attitude has been absent in America for several generations, the history of the Fugitive group is not an unprofitable study.

The significance of Mr. Graves's mistake regarding Mr. Ransom's intentions now becomes clear, and it illuminates the break between two generations of American poets. Far from booming the conspicuous properties, physical and social, of their native scene, John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, and the other Fugitive poets took, in these properties, only that minimum of public interest that one feels in one's arms and

legs. Their original approach to poetry was therefore pure—that of craftsmen. I hesitate to describe this approach as esthetic, for the term is debased. The chief emphasis was laid, or, more strictly, was discovered to have been laid, upon form and style.

This is the leading characteristic of the best poetry written in all sections of America since the era of *The Spoon River Anthology*. The motives of a generation of poets, seen through a reducing-glass, are the motives of the Fugitive group. This group had little or no influence upon the poets outside the South. They began writing in 1921, and their work points in a direction that poets everywhere, at that time, felt bound to take.

The collapse of the Middle Western movement left the younger poets helplessly open to conviction, and the recent preoccupation with form and style is largely due to, has been largely organized under, the influence of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. This influence has concentrated the energy of a generation. It has been on the whole beneficial. The best talents have recovered from the direct imitation of their masters, so that the present generation can offer to the public six or seven poets who in the art of writing are superior to the best (Mr. Robinson being excepted) of the preceding generation. I need only to name Mark Van Doren, John Crowe Ransom, Hart Crane, Léonie Adams, Yvor Winters, Archibald MacLeish; there are others almost as good.

The pursuit of form and style I have called a "direction", and it has been cherished as such by isolated persons and groups, notably the *Secession* writers, now scattered and reformed, and the recent Chicago school composed of Samuel Putnam, Mark Turbyfill, and, for a time, Glenway Wescott and Yvor Winters. But it is quite obvious that the most efficient piece of machinery is incapable of charting its own course: the stylistic excellence of contemporary American poetry is equalled only by the variety in the chaos that it holds up to the view. In this chaos there are several different Americas, none of which contains all the values of the whole and which, with respect to the whole, represent disorder. But the degree to which individual poets have

achieved a triumph over a limited material is greater than that achieved by the preceding generation envisaging a more comprehensive surface.

The inference to be drawn from this distinction is irresistible. The experiment that tried to find values for the whole of the American scene succeeded in erecting a set of fictions which collapsed after a short period of excitement; these fictive values have declined because they did not proceed from an intense realization of the projected material. They were forced, but *not made good*. The new poets steadily refuse to issue a special plea for any set of current values. They are trying to write poetry, and they are succeeding in integrating as much value as they find in themselves or in their associations with some limited scene. Mr. Phelps Putnam, from Massachusetts, and Mr. Robert Penn Warren, from Kentucky, have as much in common as a French poet and an English poet writing in the same age: only a big word, like *Zeitgeist*, can establish their communication. We must infer, then, that the attempt to boom America as a unity of feeling has failed, and that the unity has, at cock-crow, limped off a vague and ghostly abstraction, for which no one seems bent upon finding a definite symbol. For the new poets are concerned with personal and local symbols, and their poetry tends towards provincialism.

This, then, is the direction of modern poetry in America. Yet such a direction is, at least for the moment, quite negative: the literary provincialism of the younger poets has, unluckily, no political connections, and, more unluckily still, the only temporospatial support it can hope to find lies in a group of moribund cultures. A survey, therefore, of the accomplishment of the new generation brings out a perplexing variety of impulses. In the South there is the attempt to define the past in terms of an unsympathetic reaction to the industrial era; the poets in that region are conservative with respect to their own traditions, but they are prepared to use all the methods associated in the popular mind with literary "radicalism". The Middle West, since the time of Lindsay and Masters, has repudiated its in-

terest in the local speech and scene; the short memory and vague future of that section have easily plunged the young writers into "abstractionism" and anti-intellectualism in extreme forms, such as the poetic impostures (deliberate or not) of Samuel Putnam and Mark Turbyfill; but this tendency indicates a genuine impulse, which motivates the distinguished poetry of Hart Crane. The state of the New England mind is (as usual) less simple; it is still, in spite of much internal cleavage and some external disguise, a single mind, of which Putnam and Cummings are only different facets. Cummings is a deeply moral sensibility without moral ideas—a predicament which induces him to exaggerate the value of his perceptions and makes him too often the showman. Putnam is a showman too: he is a New England divine who, on the emotional plane, stands by his tradition (there is something of Robinson's feeling in him), but who appears to reject it in his concern with spectacular modern symbols; his impulse runs true to form in his mystical and romantic quest of God—as distinguished from the common-sense rationalism of the quest of the good life on the part of his Southern contemporaries. New England, the South, the Middle West, these are still our resources, and they remain distinctive if not intact. And there is the far West, where Robinson Jeffers stands alone. Jeffers's gift for narrative is unequalled in England or America, and he has invented a new narrative style. He represents, with his symbols of inversion and sterility, with his anti-intellectualism, the most ambitious reach of the West to erect its disorder and rootless energy into a symbol of the whole American scene.

A certain quality of excellence, it must be said, is the sole connection between a great number of very different poets. John Crowe Ransom has published three books of verse. The first, *Poems About God* (1919) was experimental; it barely foreshadowed the distinctive quality for which this poet is now famous. *Chills and Fever* (1924) and *Two Gentlemen in Bonds* (1926) evince the perfect fusion between style and attitude. Ransom's poetry is a richly fulfilled moment of vision which seems to be incapable of growth

and change; but his intellectual resourcefulness permits us to expect a later performance that will be quite different from anything he has done. The poetry of Donald Davidson, like Ransom's, leans heavily upon the rural culture of his section; only Davidson's method of dealing with local values, since the appearance of *An Outland Piper* (1924), grows more and more historical; *The Tall Men* (1927) is a kind of subjective epic which takes a single attitude from the pioneer period through the Great War. This interesting poem is brilliantly and incoherently written. Mark Van Doren is in some respects our most perfect craftsman. He found, in his first volume, *Spring Thunder* (1924), a style which, in two successive books, has been modified and extended, without being changed, until it is now equal to the demands of a highly complex vision. The surface simplicity of Van Doren's first poems was misleading; he is one of the most profound sensibilities in America. In his third volume, *Now the Sky* (1928), he begins the development of a complex symbolism. Léonie Adams and Louise Bogan have each published a single distinguished volume. Miss Bogan's *Body of This Death* (1923), a slight but almost perfect exhibit, announced the most accomplished woman poet of the time: Miss Bogan had succeeded in reducing a sharp sense of peripheral sensations, to which women are peculiarly sensitive, to form. But Miss Adams's *Those Not Elect* (1925) heralded a close rival. Miss Adams's range is, in fact, considerably greater than Miss Bogan's, and her style is richer and more mature; her mind is probably the freest in contemporary poetry; it is susceptible to release by all the experience at her command. Her style is a little too heavily burdened with a superabundance of imagery, and her poems often conceal their central ideas; this defect of composition may be corrected in time.

Marianne Moore and Wallace Stevens, different as they are from each other, have in common certain elements of style: precision of statement, decorative imagery, and a sense of the allusive value of nonsense phrases. The intention of Miss Moore's *Observations* (1924) is slight, but its technical perfection

has not been surpassed by a contemporary writer. She is a Victorian in whom Victorian convictions are lacking, but in whom the habits of feeling which correspond to those convictions remain; she is, in fact, deficient in compulsions of any sort—that is to say, in “ideas”; and her verse proceeds from a perceptive mechanism which seems to run on its own momentum. Stevens is quite differently motivated. *Harmonium* (1922) contains an impulse more serious than Miss Moore’s. His dandyism, which has been ably described by Mr. Gorham B. Munson, is the perfect surface beneath which plays an intense Puritanism. He is undoubtedly the most finished poet of the age, and he is the only American poet who has been intelligently affected by the Parnassians and the Symbolists.

There remain three important craftsmen. Hart Crane’s one volume, *White Buildings* (1926), is probably the most distinguished first book ever issued in the country. It has been followed, in the last two years in various journals, by fragments of an American epic to be entitled *The Bridge*: Crane is the only interesting talent of his generation who is preoccupied with the idea of united America, and it is worth pointing out, again, that he comes from the Middle West. His chief defect is the lack of a system of disciplined values which would clarify and control the most prodigal poetic gift in America. His genius for sheer writing—for composition, for variety and subtlety of rhythm, for freshness of imagery—occasionally gets out of hand: his literary talent exceeds at the moment what he has coherently to say. Crane’s blank verse is one of the few important contributions made by a contemporary to poetic style. Archibald MacLeish continues to promise more than he has achieved. His literary competence is tremendous. His writing has an inveterate distinction, but it lacks direction, weight, and solidity; there seems to be no leading symbol that plays upon his ideas and he has thus not been able to develop a consistent style. Yvor Winters is in the experimental stage. *The Bare Hills* (1927) brings to an end his first phase; this book, had it appeared ten years ago, would have won its author the first place among the Imagist poets.

There are certain other poets whose work has not been published in books, but it is so good that it should be better known. Edmund Wilson has written some of the most accomplished poetry of our time. In attitude and the sense of value he belongs less to the generation of Crane and MacLeish than to the society that produced Mr. John Jay Chapman: his poetry is almost exclusively concerned with social appearances and their meaning, and he has a good deal in common with the author of *London* and *The Vanity of Human Wishes*. Malcolm Cowley has published in the last few years very little poetry; he is one of the most finished writers in America. He was deeply affected by post-bellum literary movements in France, and under this influence he wrote a good deal of verse, which is not his best. Cowley is one of those rare American poets genuinely gifted with rural and regional feeling, and his best poetry is motivated by it. Robert Penn Warren, a member of the Fugitive group, is shaking off, in recent poems, the influence of T. S. Eliot; his best verse, like Cowley’s, derives its symbols from a specific region; but, unlike Cowley’s, it is supported by certain moral obsessions that give it intensity and depth. There are other interesting poets—Saville Clark, Lincoln Fittell, Margaret Moore, Janet Lewis, Merrill Moore—who may be expected to produce interesting verse. So little, however, of the work of these poets is accessible that it is difficult to predict their future.

The conclusion to which the impartial observer of the American scene is driven is that there is no homogeneous body of beliefs and feelings into which the poet may be educated; in all these poets there is no positive attitude that we may describe as national, as peculiarly our own. The formation of such an attitude is, in a sense not easily defined, the American problem. But it is significant that the only poet of the new generation—as I have already observed—who is attempting to create such an attitude in national terms should come from the Middle West. This is the section where local tradition is weakest; the spiritual well-being of the West depends upon its success in assimilating the cultural tradition of the older sections. I

have pointed out the failure of the past generation to achieve this unity of feeling. Hart Crane's effort in this direction is more ambitious than Lindsay's or Sandburg's, and because he is a poet of the first order the publication of *The Bridge* will be an important event in contemporary letters. Of its success in creating a national myth it is our privilege to be sceptical in advance.

For the American problem, as I have stated it, is not national at all; it is sectional. It is the problem of survival in the Middle West. The Middle West, of course, is not purely a geographical term; it applies to any community where the population is restless and its activities industrialized. And it is not surprising that there is a powerful metropolitan school of writers who have undertaken the formation of the American idea: New York absorbs and intensifies the motives of all our Middle Wests. This motive is, in general, disorder attempting to correct itself by means of the further disorder of catchwords and slogans. There is no reason to infer, from the distress into which the lack of an American myth betrays us, that it is possible to create one. It is not even desirable that such a myth should be created. The only effective procedure in the present crisis has been, surprisingly enough, described in *The New Republic* by Mr. Waldo Frank. (I say it is surprising that Mr. Frank should describe it because he is himself the product of the megalopolitan life that has undone us.)

This procedure is the formation of groups. Our groups since the middle of the nineteenth century have been rootless collections of people spellbound by Utopia or advancing some special plea. It is hard to find a disinterested group in our recent history. The Imagists were not a genuine group; they were a miscellany of people who, under Miss Lowell, formulated a public cry. Other groups, like the recent "Secessionists", have formed to resist the organized literary journalism of New York. It is outside the purpose of this essay to analyze the intention of the powerful group headed by Mr. A. R. Orage, which exhibits the fallacy of most of our groups. For external authority which does not work up through the terms

of American life only cuts its adherents away from their roots, and thus accelerates the process of disorder which it proposes to correct.

The group should be provincial. Its formation should be accidental. Its activity should be, not the circulation of opinion, but the discipline of art forms. It should be a group of craftsmen—of painters, of philosophers, of poets. It is possible that never again will powerful groups, so motivated, appear in the United States. And yet the present state of American poetry points to certain negative conditions favorable to their appearance.

For the disordered spirit of the new poets is collective; as individuals they have attained to a more intense personal ordering of the spirit than their immediate predecessors had achieved. They lack the facile optimism of the past generation and evince but little feeling for solidarity in modern life. The poets have retired upon their private resources. The possibility of more limited solidarities has increased. The personal resources of the poet are capable of further intensification if they can be brought back to contact with the local cultures from which, in each instance, they originally sprang. Only a return to the provinces, to the small, self-contained centres of life, will put the all-destroying abstraction, America, safely to rest.

The rootless character of contemporary life explains the tenuous substance which informs the mind of the contemporary poet. It explains the obscurity and difficulty of his verse. There are no fixed points in the firmament, no settled ideas of conscience, which he can call upon to simplify his speech. He lacks ideas, but it is not his business to make them; it is his business to put them to use.

It is a great error to suppose that modern poetry is intellectual. It is anti-intellectual: the type of intellectual poet is Alexander Pope, who dealt almost exclusively with ideas. To tell the contemporary American poet that he is an intellectualist is to obscure the difficulty of his problem in his own mind, and to give him a false sense of security.